

Continuing

Tragedy motivates senior to create life-saving resource

Haley Havelock *staff writer*

A semicolon tattoo is illustrated on senior Justis Daniels-Bezout's wrist.

It is a symbol to continue on.

He could have stopped when five of his friends died from suicide.

But he didn't. He persisted.

It was the summer of 2016. When Daniels-Bezout returned after summer vacation, he returned to a distraught town. Five of his classmates had died by suicide within six months.

"The impact was felt by the community... I was heart broken, I was freaking out about it, 'cause one of them was my closest friend," Daniels-Bezout said. "These five kids have just taken their lives. Why isn't anyone doing anything about this?"

Daniels-Bezout, now attending Wando, lived in a small town in New Mexico, a small town where mental illness was pushed underneath the rug. The town was located only a few miles away from the Rio Grande Bridge, on the national register for historic places. Unfortunately, it's also known for being a place with a high suicide rate.

Daniels-Bezout said his first reaction -- after grief -- was frustration.

"Everybody responded in similar ways, like how we always lost kids to the bridge... This wasn't okay to watch happen and not do anything about it," he said. "And when it happens, [people] just to say that it always happens and [they] don't try to change it."

So Daniels-Bezout and his mother -- Luckie Daniels -- met at their kitchen table for their daily chai tea party. But instead of discussing Justis' day at school, this time they were heartbroken, starving for a way to cope.

"Every day my mom would make sure we carved out a specific time -- no matter what was going on we would meet for tea," Daniels-Bezout said.

That's when the idea was born: it was time to take action to stop teen suicides.

It was time to form a non-profit that was geared towards helping prevent teen suicides and removing the stigma behind mental illness.

"Sitting at the table talking [with his mom] about what it [the non-profit] would be is to-

tally different then ... what it became: this huge teen-led initiative, led by teens for teens who felt like they could make a difference by saving the lives of other teens, which is a beautiful thing," Daniels-Bezout said.

Daniels, who works as the Google Expeditions program manager, guided her son to the idea of using technology. Daniels-Bezout was able to use his burning passion to help save as many lives as he could.

Together, mother and son came up with a resource that would help save many lives.

Finding courage

Her son was hurting. One of his closest friends had committed suicide. Three others he knew had also died within the same summer. For Daniels, it was a hard time. How could she help her son? While some would be leery about talking about suicide, Daniels knew she had to face the topic with her son about the deaths of his friends.

"You have to be brave enough to have conversations that matter," she said. "What was really effective was how we did not ask for anyone's permission [to start a non-profit organization]. We didn't care if the adults felt uncomfortable, our voice needed to be louder than theirs."

Daniels said people often only talk about suicide after a death has happened -- not focusing on how to stop it before it occurs. She believes people have these conversations as a way to cope after a tragedy strikes.

But Daniels said these conversations should be happening all the time, not only after someone commits suicide.

The non-profit launched in October of 2016. It's called See Something, Say Something -- dedicated to help communities deal with mental illness and help teens.

"The first mission is advocacy. Sparking a conversation is huge. Often times we underestimate the power of dialogue," Daniels-Bezout said. "If you can look at something for what it is and not sweep it under the rug, you have the

power to change it, but if you can get the youth talking, that's huge."

Sparking the conversation

The launch of the non-profit -- an app and a website -- was a success. It drew so much attention, in fact, that Daniels-Bezout was offered his own radio show, called SeeSay: Hear Us, in New Mexico. He took up the offer in February 2017, and created a sub branch of See Something, Say Something that opened up conversations that people were not having about mental illness

One segment of the radio show -- which ran for an hour each Sunday -- that was particularly successful was when he hosted a Tattooathon on April 19. It partnered with Project

Semicolon to give teenagers and their parents tattoos of a semi-colon.

"A semicolon was this instance that an author could have chose to end their sentence but they didn't -- it's a symbol of continuation," he said. "We ended up tattooing hundreds of teens and their parents ...you heard this conversation between children and their parents that you weren't hearing before. It brought me to tears."

Daniels-Bezout pulls up his sleeve, and then looks at his mother's arm.

They have matching semi-colon tattoos on their forearms.

One woman who got tattooed with her son told the radio station how she was once suicidal; but her son ended up saving her life, giving her a reason to live. The son said he had never known this.

The radio show ended up winning "Best Specialty Show in the State of New Mexico" from the New Mexico Broadcasters Association.

When the Broadcasters Association flew him down to accept his award, Daniels-Bezout procrastinated to make his acceptance speech.

"The day came and I wrote it as I was walking up on stage, then I was like forget it, I'm going to do it heart to heart because that's really

what works," Daniels-Bezout said. "It became less of a speech and more a call to action."

Facebook even asked him to do a Podcast for them. He is one of the youngest people ever to work with Facebook.

Facing the challenges

Daniels-Bezout started to get letters in the mail about what teens can do in the community to help. He got people talking about this touchy subject, which was his main goal.

As a high school student, he is familiar with the challenges that everyday teens have to face. He took this into account when coming up with the second mission, which is education.

"They teach you how to do calculus, but they don't teach you how to do taxes. They teach you how to do calculus but they don't teach you how to function or how to cope, none of the important things," he said.

His frustration with the focus of education led him to take change into his own hands. He partnered with the Mental Health First Aid Association of America to educate teachers and other students what to do when someone might be suicidal or having mental distress and how to look out for the triggers.

In a world where teens are constantly on their phones, Daniels-Bezout made it his mission to connect to teens with the app he made for See Something, Say Something.

He credits his mom for making the app. One section of it allows the user to leave words of encouragement or reasons to live in 140 characters or less.

"If you had 140 characters to save a life, what would you say?" Daniels-Bezout asked.

But 140 words from a stranger can speak volumes and become the difference between life and death, he said.

"Everybody felt guilty, including me and that's what I think hit so hard, because I didn't notice the signs, I didn't even know what signs to look for," Daniels-Bezout said.

"I want young people to know that they have options, and that at some point it gets better," Daniels said. "If you can hold on, if you can figure it out, just fight through, it does get better."

Justis Daniels-Bezout and his mother, Luckie Daniels are some of the many who dedicate themselves to help prevent suicide. If you want to get involved please go to <https://seesomethingsaysomething.today> or if you or anyone you know is having suicidal thoughts or tendencies please call 1-800-273-8555.



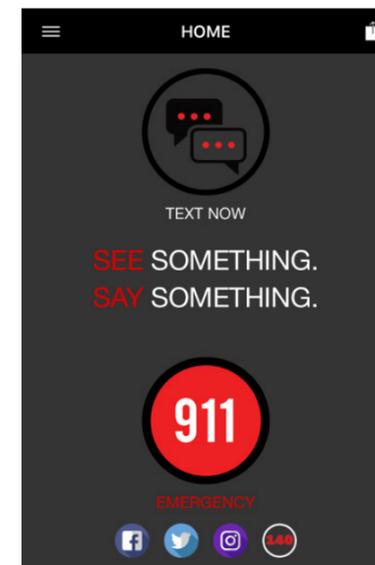
Senior Justis Daniels-Bezout and his mother, Luckie Daniels, look over his suicide prevention website. The two worked together to create the #see something say something site. photo // Mary Prickett

Website: <https://seesomethingsaysomething.today>

App: SEESAY Teen Suicide Prevention



SEE SOMETHING. SAY SOMETHING.



With teen suicide rates on the rise, the least many can do is be aware of risk factors, as well as warning signs.

Risk factors

Loss of relationships
Alcohol or substance abuse
History of trauma or abuse
Sense of being isolated
Exposure to others who have died by suicide
Previous suicide attempts

Information compiled by Annie Wright

Warning signs

Withdrawal from friends, family or activities
Having dramatic changes in mood
Threatening to hurt or kill themselves
Increased use of drugs or alcohol
Seeking access to pills, weapons or other means to kill themselves
Sleeping all the time or being unable to sleep
Acting recklessly
Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide